

DECEMBER 14, 2004

**SCHAKOWSKY TESTIFIES BEFORE CHICAGO CITY COUNCIL ON DISPARITY OF
BENEFITS FOR
ILLINOIS' DISABLED VETERANS**

**"THERE NEEDS TO BE SERIOUS ACCOUNTABILITY AMONG THE LEADERSHIP OF THE
VA &
ITS CHICAGO REGIONAL OFFICE"**

CHICAGO, IL - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Chief Deputy Whip, today testified before the Chicago City Council's Health Committee about Illinois veterans not receiving the disability benefits that they deserve and need, and said that "there needs to be serious accountability among the leadership in the VA and its Chicago regional office."

Schakowsky said in Illinois, "disabled veterans are 40% less likely to receive disability benefits than veterans across the country and when they do, they receive disproportionately lower benefit levels."

According to an investigation by the Chicago Sun-Times, Illinois veterans receive an average of \$6,802 a year in disability benefits, placing them almost last in the nation and putting them behind veterans in other states by as much as \$4,000 a year. While 10 percent of veterans around the country qualify for disability benefits, only 6 percent of Illinois veterans do.

"We need to give our soldiers everything they need in Iraq, Afghanistan and other war zones in order to keep them as safe as possible. We also need to make sure that disabled veterans receive what they need when they come home. That is why the disparities between the provision of disability benefits in the Chicago region and other parts of the country is so disturbing and why it demands an immediate and effective response," she continued.

Schakowsky joined members of the Illinois Congressional delegation in calling on current Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi to "review all factors that could be contributing to the disparity experienced by Illinois veterans and report his results to us no later than January 5."

Schakowsky concluded, "Veterans' benefits should always be a top national priority. There is certainly no excuse for denying them the benefits they have earned on the grounds that we cannot afford it, not while we continue to pass Republican-sponsored tax cuts for millionaires."

Below is the full text of Schakowsky's testimony:

Testimony of U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL)
Health Committee, Chicago City Council
Disparity of Benefits for Illinois' Disabled Veterans
December 14, 2004

Thank you for convening this hearing of the Health Committee to review the troubling news that Illinois veterans are not receiving the disability benefits that they deserve and need. In our state, disabled veterans are 40% less likely to receive disability benefits than veterans across the country and when they do, they receive disproportionately lower benefit levels.

Last week, The New England Journal of Medicine reported that advances in battlefield medicine have reduced casualties in Iraq and, at the same time, have resulted in a higher number of seriously injured soldiers returning home. At this point, nearly 10,000 military men and women have sustained serious injuries - more than the number of injuries in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 or the first 5 years of the Vietnam War.

We also heard from soldiers last week that they do not have the equipment that they need and we know that at least some of these injuries could have been prevented if our soldiers had not been sent into battle without protective body armor, in unarmored Humvees, and without other essential equipment.

We need to give our soldiers everything they need in Iraq, Afghanistan and other war zones in order to keep them as safe as possible. We also need to make sure that disabled veterans receive what they need when they come home. That is why the disparities between the provision of disability benefits in the Chicago region and other parts of the country is so disturbing and why it demands an immediate and effective response.

Our soldiers fight for their country and risk their lives and the livelihood of their families. All they ask in return is that if in the course of duty they become disabled, they receive full and fair disability benefits. Unfortunately, in Illinois, that is not the case.

The Chicago Sun-Times recently reported that Illinois veterans get an average of \$6,802 a year in disability benefits, placing them almost last in the nation and putting them behind veterans in other states by as much as \$4,000 a year. While 10 percent of veterans around the country qualify for disability benefits, only 6 percent of Illinois veterans do.

There appears to be a troubling pattern and practice of reducing or denying full benefits for disabled veterans in the Chicago office. We need to find out the reasons for this disparity and correct them as soon as possible so that our veterans are treated fairly.

In response to complaints and demands from the Illinois Congressional delegation, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi, has asked the VA's Inspector General to independently review the system for rating disability claims. However, Secretary Principi will soon be stepping down and President Bush has nominated the former Republican National Committee chairman, Jim Nicholson, to replace him. We can not allow that review to fall through the cracks.

Our veterans need help now. They should not have to wait for the Bush bureaucracy to study the matter - perhaps for months -while they continue to be denied the disability payments that will enable to them to afford housing and other necessities

I have joined with Representative Evans and the rest of the Illinois delegation in requesting that Secretary Principi review all factors that could be contributing to the disparity experienced by Illinois veterans and report his results to us no later than January 5. My colleagues and I will then do everything possible to correct those factors for the future.

We also have the responsibility to help the veterans who are applying for disabilities today or who may have been recently denied benefits. We should make sure that every veteran has adequate representation to help them with their claims or appeals. We should immediately look at every case and on an expedited basis provide compensation adjustments where they are warranted. And we should demand that VA Regional Office staff meet with veterans advocates immediately to discuss possible improvements even in advance of the VA's findings.

We should fully fund all of our Veteran's health programs. Under the Republican budget and the Veterans spending bill recently passed by Congress, the bipartisan members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee has stated that there is a \$1.3 billion gap in coverage for existing programs.

We need to come together and close that gap. I believe that we should meet our promise to veterans and their families - not require them to go begging for disability benefits or wait in line for health care or live on the streets because they cannot afford a home. Veterans' benefits should always be a top national priority. There is certainly no excuse for denying them the benefits they have earned on the grounds that we cannot afford it, not while we continue to pass tax cuts for millionaires and let corporations avoid paying taxes by stashing their profits

Senator Durbin, our Senior Senator, has acted forcefully to help correct this injustice and has requested that the VA Secretary come to Chicago to discuss this situation. I hope that the Secretary will come so that he can meet personally with our veterans and with

members of Congress to explain how and when the Bush Administration is going to solve this problem.□□□

There seems to be bipartisan agreement that this is a problem, now I hope we will see some bipartisan action for a fair and quick response.□ We are fortunate to have Illinois members on the House Veterans Affairs Committee - ranking member Lane Evans and Rep. Luis Gutierrez.□ Senator-elect Barack Obama will serve on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.□ I know that they, along with Senator Durbin, will continue to fight for the rights of our veterans.

I want to see action here in Chicago, I want an explanation and I think there needs to be some serious accountability among the leadership in the VA and its Chicago regional office.